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HOW THE WAR WAS WON?

The Anglo-Irish War, 1916-1921: a People's War

WILLIAM H. KAUTT, 1999

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This book attempts to frame an important question and model a plausible answer. Unfortunately, neither task is done particularly satisfactorily. The model of a people's war which Kautt suggests, based largely on the work of Mao, does yield useful observations when applied to Anglo-Irish relations in the years 1916-21. The concession by British politicians of a large measure of autonomy to nationalist Ireland in 1921 certainly does require more serious explanation by historians than has commonly been offered hitherto. But in his most rhetorical moments, Kautt suggests that these years witnessed a military victory by Irish nationalists (or perhaps "Ireland") over the British empire. 'After eight hundred years of betrayal, intrigues, failed revolts, deportations, oppression and genocide, how did Ireland gain its independence?' he asks. 'In short, with blood' (pp. 2-3). This hypothesis is ultimately not sustainable, and, indeed, Kautt wisely does not try to sustain it. Nonetheless, this tension in his text is a symptom of a deeper flaw. Kautt can only squeeze his subject inside the rigid definition of a people's war by first conceptualising the Anglo-Irish conflict in a way which trivialises or ignores some of its many dimensions.

Kautt frames his initial proposition to imply that a hypothesis is needed to explain the astonishing victory of the small Irish nation over the powerful British empire in a war fought in the years 1916-21. The errors

in this framework prove ultimately inescapable. Conor Cruise O'Brien famously suggested, for instance, that Irish nationalist violence in these years actually achieved nothing.¹ O'Brien's assertion may have been dictated by contemporary political circumstances, but a historian of Kautt's subject needs to demonstrate why the assertion is inadequate. Instead, Kautt proceeds by barely alluding to the years before 1916. Given that British policy-makers had (formally at least) conceded a large measure of the autonomy embodied in the treaty of 1921 long before the 1916-21 war started, this is a serious omission.

More tellingly, John McColgan and Paul Bew have suggested that from the point of view of certain objectives, British policy in Ireland, at least in the latter part of Kautt's period, should not be regarded as a failure at all.² Rather the policy of Irish nationalists could be regarded as having failed by underwriting the partition of Ireland without extracting the rump Irish Free State from the British empire. The fact of partition, indeed, raises further questions about the identity of this Irish nation, its success and this war. For large phases of these years, the major battleground in terms of casualties was Ulster. Contemporaries and subsequent commentators alike have been loath to focus on this battleground, perhaps because of its inherent complexity. The myth of the victory of Michael Collins and his colleagues, which Kautt largely reiterates, is overdue interrogation in the light of their failure to protect the northern nationalists in either a military or a political sense.³

It is most surprising that Kautt does not explore the international dimension, because surely the diplomatic aspect of the "war" is one which "the Irish nation" did "win" and has "won" almost continuously ever since.⁴ British policy-makers were clearly concerned during this period (not for the first time) about international misunderstandings of their policies in Ireland. Ironically, Kautt's image of Ireland as a small nation under the heel of a larger oppressor was shared at the time by

¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Herod: reflections on political violence*, (London 1978) 32.

² P. Bew, 'Moderate nationalism and the Irish revolution, 1916-1923', *Historical Journal* 42 (1999), 729-49; John McColgan, *British policy and the Irish administration, 1920-22*, (London 1983).

³ Alvin Jackson, *Ireland, 1798-1998*, (Oxford 1999) 251-52.

⁴ Adrian Guelke, *Northern Ireland: the international perspective*, (Dublin 1988) 3-12.

many international observers, particularly in Irish America. However, Kautt does not seriously assess the geopolitical implications of this fact.

Kautt's book is hardly alone in overlooking the ideological dimension to the Anglo-Irish conflict within Britain. Even the limited British military deployment in Ireland in these years evoked a fierce criticism from British observers which made further commitment politically undesirable; hence the "Anglo-Irish war", one should not forget, is a phrase which has largely entered the lingua franca of academic analysis via Irish nationalist hyperbole.⁵ Admittedly, British critics were spurred on specifically by the complexion of the conflict, a complexion which resulted from the errors of British administrators. But this observation also only takes us a short step, since a number of said administrators had already accepted many of the consequences of the conflict in terms of nationalist Irish autonomy before the conflict ever began. Analysis of the Anglo-Irish conflict can help to illuminate many errors, inconsistencies and irrationalities in prevalent British political beliefs; but this is not likely to be achieved through the analytical tool of the people's war.

Kautt's assimilation of primary sources on the conflict is sometimes impressive, but also erratic. For instance, he has an unfortunate tendency to take statements from Erskine Childers, who was heavily involved in the Dáil's propaganda campaign, at face value (pp. 106, 110). Such curiosities mean that Kautt's narrative of the conflict is not really a rival to those of Michael Laffan and Charles Townshend.⁶ This book is a good starting point in consideration of some issues which the extensive literature of Irish history in recent times has inexplicably ducked; but it leaves many such questions requiring further illumination.

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⁵ Liam Kennedy, *Colonialism, religion and nationalism in Ireland*, (Belfast 1996) 196.

⁶ Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party. 1916-1923*, (Cambridge 1999); C. Townshend, *The British campaign in Ireland, 1919-1921: the development of political and military policies*, (Oxford 1975).